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INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: BA'ATH PARTY PROTESTS COMMEMORATE ISRAELI
ANNEXATION OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

REF: 06 DAMASCUS 5447

CLASSIFIED BY: A/DCM WILLIAM ROEBUCK, FOR REASONS 1.4 B/D.

11. (U) SUMMARY. TWO EVENTS OCCURRED ON THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF ISRAEL'S ANNEXATION OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS FROM SYRIA. FIRST, LACKLUSTER ANNUAL PROTESTS ORGANIZED BY THE BA'ATH PARTY TOOK PLACE IN THE SYRIAN PROVINCE OF QUNNEITRA. IN ADDITION, AN AMORPHOUS GROUP KNOWN AS THE COMMITTEES FOR THE LIBERATION OF GOLAN CLAIMED TO BE IN A POSITION TO EXCHANGE A CAPTURED ISRAELI SOLDIER FOR A NUMBER OF SYRIAN PRISONERS. THE FACT THAT THE GROUP, WHICH MOST CONTACTS BELIEVE IS A CREATION OF THE REGIME, RE-APPEARS AGAIN IN THE MEDIA FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SIX MONTHS, SEEMS TO BE AN INDICATION THAT THE REGIME FEELS THE NEED TO BACK AWAY SOMEWHAT FROM THE PRO-PEACE-PROCESS RHETORIC IT HAD BEEN USING IN THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS (AND FROM THE EMBARRASSING REPORTS LEAKED IN ISRAEL ABOUT BACK CHANNEL DEAL-MAKING ON THE GOLAN.) END SUMMARY.

12. (U) ON FEBRUARY 14 THE BA'ATH PARTY SPONSORED ITS ANNUAL PROTEST IN THE SYRIAN PROVINCE OF QUNEITRA TO MARK THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1982 GENERAL STRIKE AGAINST ISRAEL'S ANNEXATION OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS. THE PROTESTS LARGELY CONSISTED OF SEVERAL REGIONAL AND MID-LEVEL BA,ATH PARTY REPRESENTATIVES GIVING SPEECHES TO A MODEST CROWD OF LOCALS DECRYING THE CONTINUED ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS AND URGING RESIDENTS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER TO CONTINUE RESISTANCE UNTIL "LIBERATION IS ACHIEVED." THE HIGHEST RANKING SARG REPRESENTATIVE WAS THE GOVERNOR OF QUNEITRA, NAWAF AL-FARES, ACCORDING TO SYRIAN PRESS. THE ANNUAL PROTESTS DREW ONLY ROUTINE COVERAGE IN THE SYRIAN STATE RUN PRESS. FOR INSTANCE, THE STORY WAS BELOW THE FOLD IN GOVERNMENT-OWNED TISHREEN AND NONE OF THE SYRIAN DAILIES REPORTED ANY NUMBERS FOR THE PROTEST. (NOTE: THERE WAS A SUBSEQUENT DEMONSTRATION FEBRUARY 15 OF SOME 500 PEOPLE IN FRONT OF UNDP CALLING FOR AN END TO THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF THE GOLAN AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RELEVANT UNSC RESOLUTIONS.)

13. (C) AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE QUNNEITRA PROTESTS, THERE HAVE BEEN CONTRADICTORY REGIONAL PRESS REPORTS ABOUT A PRESS RELEASE FROM A LITTLE-KNOWN GROUP, THE "COMMITTEES FOR THE LIBERATION OF GOLAN FROM ISRAEL," WHICH CLAIMED THE GROUP CAN EITHER FACILITATE THE RELEASE OR IS ACTUALLY HOLDING ISRAELI MIA, GUY HEVER, WHO DISAPPEARED IN THE GOLAN IN 1997. REGIONAL PRESS ALSO REPORTS THAT "THE COMMITTEES" SAY THEY WILL RELEASE HEVER IN EXCHANGE FOR NINE SYRIAN PRISONERS HELD BY ISRAEL. THE REPORTED NEWS RELEASE MENTIONING HEVER, HOWEVER, IS THE FIRST TIME IN MONTHS, THAT THE COMMITTEES

HAVE BEEN IN THE NEWS. (NOTE: POST ASSUMES THAT HEVER IS THE SAME MIA ON WHOSE BEHALF SENATOR DODD IN DECEMBER 2006 REQUESTED PRESIDENT ASAD'S PERSONAL INTERVENTION AS REPORTED IN REFTEL. END NOTE.)

14. (C) COMMENT: THE COMMITTEES FOR THE LIBERATION OF GOLAN FIRST CAME TO POST'S ATTENTION IN LATE AUGUST 2006, IN THE WAKE OF THE 2006 LEBANON WAR BETWEEN ISRAEL AND HIZBALLAH. AT THAT TIME THE THEN-UNKNOWN SYRIAN GROUP, SUPPOSEDLY BASED ON THE SYRIAN SIDE OF THE GOLAN, ISSUED A STATEMENT NOTING THAT IT MODELED ITSELF ON THE EXAMPLE OF HIZBALLAH AND THREATENING TO ABDUCT ISRAELI SOLDIERS TO SWAP THEM FOR SYRIAN PRISONERS IN ISRAEL. AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASAD MADE A SERIES OF PUBLIC STATEMENTS SHARPENING HIS RHETORIC ON THE GOLAN ISSUE AND NOTING THAT RESISTANCE, "AS A POLITICAL DIRECTION AND A MILITARY ONE," IS AN OPTION IF THE PEACE OPTION IS AT A COMPLETE STANDSTILL. THAT SHARPENED ASAD RHETORIC -- AS WELL AS NEWS ABOUT THE LITTLE-KNOWN GOLAN RESISTANCE GROUP -- FADED OVER THE PAST SIX MONTHS AS SYRIA EMPHASIZED ITS DESIRE (SUPPORTED WITH BACK-CHANNEL EFFORTS) TO RE-START THE PEACE PROCESS WITH ISRAEL. MOST OF OUR CONTACTS HAVE CONSISTENTLY DISMISSED THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE GOLANI GROUP, INDICATING THAT IT IS ALMOST CERTAINLY A CREATION OF THE REGIME AND WAS MERELY BEING USED AS A PROP TO LEND A DEGREE OF CREDIBILITY TO ASAD'S SHARPER RHETORIC. THE FACT THAT THE GROUP RE-APPEARS NOW, GRABBING ATTENTION BY MENTIONING FOR THE FIRST TIME THE WELL-KNOWN CASE OF GUY HEVER, SEEMS TO BE AN INDICATION THAT THE REGIME FEELS THE NEED TO BACK AWAY SOMEWHAT FROM THE PRO-PEACE-PROCESS RHETORIC IT HAD BEEN USING IN THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS (AND FROM THE EMBARRASSING REPORTS LEAKED IN ISRAEL ABOUT BACK CHANNEL DEAL-MAKING ON THE GOLAN.)

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